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THE THING THAT MIGHT BE.

THE tendency to go about showing other people what might be is widely enough sown by nature. But the mere tendency which exists in us all when young is unequally developed in later life, as individuals vary in observation of what is, power of imagining what might be, and energy of will urging them to replace what is by what might be. As we advance in life, many things occur to check the growth, or kill the germ of this tendency. The two main counteracting forces are: (1) The enlargement of our own knowledge, which discovers to us reasons why things are not better done than they are, which reasons had been before beyond our vision. (2) The discovery that the trade of general improver is one that is apt to make us very odious to our fellows, and that, even if we can show demonstratively that something better could be put in the place of something that is, we had better not say so.

Thus it comes to pass that every ingenuous and intelligent youth is sent into the world by nature with the initial promptings of enterprise and innovation, and that the same youth, by a process equally natural, is found in middle age a stout, conservative, and sturdy champion of the thing that is. Thus there goes on in the social laboratory a constant manufacture of a generation of conservatives out of a generation of liberals; and by this thesis and antithesis of nature the equilibrium of a political community is maintained.

It is not enough to say that the antithesis of the old and the new—the old striving to maintain itself, the new struggling to get a footing—is widely diffused; it is universal. Trace it first throughout human society. Begin within the individual, and in the life of a single man you see the transformation of the ambitious and reforming youth into the stout champion of the creed

of orthodoxy, that "Whatever is, is right." We extend our view to the British nation, and we see its social progress to have been worked out by the shock of two colliding forces,—that which aims at change, and that which resists change. Of these forces, the terms "Liberal" and "Conservative" are very imperfect names. For it is not only in party politics that the conflict of principles occurs; it is met with in every city and municipality throughout the kingdom; it is found in the church and in the family, in all arts and manufactures, and meets us on all occasions in the common business of every-day life.

Now enlarge the horizon, look beyond Great Britain, and see the same conflict of principle developing itself upon a greater scale on the wider area of Europe. It is true the old political factors are still in operation. There exists still the jealousy of hostile races and languages—a jealousy which, in one instance at least, where the pushing Teuton finds himself in contact with a most pushing race,—the Slav,—threatens to override all perception of a common interest in a common civilization. Europe is still divided by the old religious schism into Catholic and Protestant. This dividing element has still great hold on the passions of men, notwithstanding that its foundation is a mere sentiment and does not represent any social or human interest.

These two pairs of opposed forces, Teuton and Slav, Catholic and Protestant, may, at any moment, break into violent conflict, with consequences disastrous to the community of nations. But these conflicts, which have filled so many pages of historical books, are incidental disturbances of the surface only; they form no part of the moral antagonism by which humanity is carried along on the road of civilization. The collision of rival races, and the battle of hostile creeds, are facts of first importance in the eyes of practical statesmen. In the theory of social evolution they are facts of secondary moment. The progress of human society, from the lowest type of animal aggregation toward the most highly organized state which we can conceive, is being conducted all the while by means of the perpetual struggle between what is and what might be. This strife of elements is always going on in the bosom of every society, but, like all the great operations of nature, noiselessly and imperceptibly. In ordinary conditions of society it requires close and minute observation to detect the traces of the conflict. It is only when discontent with what is assumes unusual dimensions that public attention is

arrested by its manifestations, as just now by the agrarian outrages in Ireland, or the Nihilistic frenzy in Russia. For what is Nihilism? It is only an enthusiasm for what might be, vague in point of idea, ecstatic in its passion. Nihilism is an ultra form of rejection of what is, not illuminated by any rational conception of that better thing which should replace it. The Nihilist does not advance beyond the brute desire to destroy. His motto is :

“Alles was besteht
Ist werth dass es zu Grunde geht.”

The only value of existing institutions is that they offer something for us to pull down. This instinct, thus blindly working its way through burning, wasting, killing, is recognized by the naturalist as the same human instinct which, in more fortunate countries, manifests itself in those inventions and improvements which make life more comfortable and more beautiful. And as, in Russia, the instinct of bettering oneself takes the form of wild and aimless destruction, so the counter-instinct of protection of what is takes the brute form of the stick and the bayonet. The two natural forces—the tendency to the might be, and the persistence in what is—the two forces through whose equilibrium social progress is worked out—are thus exhibited to us in the east of Europe in a form so elementary that most of our political writers are unable to recognize their identity with the two factors which, in the west of Europe, have peacefully built up the complex fabric of our civilization.

I introduced into my last sentence two words denoting two new ideas, to which I am now conducted by the course of my remarks,—the idea of equilibrium, and the idea of progress. For at least five centuries, progress in the western states of Europe has been worked out by the collision and the balance of these two opposite principles—innovation and persistence in the old. It is unnecessary to say that persistence alone could not generate progress. The two things are incompatible. But it is not self-evident that progressive civilization is not the result of a single force, viz., the spirit of improvement. A little reflection, however, will show us that no improvement whatever in art, in science, in government, in manufacture, or in any process of any kind, can be made except by one who is in complete and practical possession of the old method which is to be improved upon.

One of the most radical revolutions on the record of science is that which substituted the Copernican conception of our system for the Ptolemaic conception, according to which the earth was stationary and placed at the center of solar space. This is an extreme case of novelty, inasmuch as the whole of the old idea had to be thrown away, and a new conception, the direct contradictory of the old, had to be taken up in its place. But the new conception could not have been arrived at, and was not in fact reached by Copernicus, without a thorough possession of, and habitual meditation upon, the Ptolemaic hypothesis, and the mathematical tradition of the Greeks.

If we want an example on a great scale, of the attempt to construct the new without building it into the old, we may find a signal one in the history of France. The latter half of the eighteenth century produced in that country a remarkable reaction against authority—against all authority—in science—in morals—in religion—in government. The principle of authority had in the two preceding centuries been strained to the utmost; it had been exaggerated into centralization in the state, into suppression of non-conformity in the church. Against this violent tension of a single principle,—the principle of persistence in what is,—there set in as violent a reaction in the direction of the opposite idea—the thought of what might be. With an understanding too logical to allow for the friction of personal interests, and a temper too impatient to await the natural growths of time, the French dreamed of constitutions framed according to an abstract idea of the state. French encyclopedist philosophy conceived of man as of a being everywhere and at all times one and the same, and it proposed to fit him with one (and the same for all countries) perfect system of natural law, which was to be arrived at not by the cumbrous process of codifying and correcting existing customary law, but which was to be drawn directly from the dictates of right reason. Wielding an authority more absolute than had been possessed by Louis XIV., the French republic endeavored to impose the new ideas in church and state by summary legislation. The history of France for the last hundred years is a comment on the impossibility of superseding the natural agencies of progress by artificial legislation; it is an exhibition, on a vast scale, of the fallacy of imposing by authority the what might be, instead of ingrafting it with scrupulous care upon what is. No form of constitution in France can be

held to be more than a transitory phase; at present there is a republic, with a president, two chambers, and universal male suffrage—but to-morrow! No Frenchman who reflects can look forward with any confidence to to-morrow.

Institutions, like minds, only grow by enlargement and assimilation, not by abrupt change. It has been said of our commerce, by the present premier, that it advances by leaps and bounds. Not so with the progress toward the social ideal. The march of civilization, like the march of nature, is one of imperceptible transformation.

So much on the necessity for the coördination of the two factors of innovation and persistence to bring about progress. Now we turn to the idea of progress itself.

When you pause on this idea of progress, you will find that you have been brought, by following the thread of my argument,—if you have followed it,—face to face with a curious fact in the history of nineteenth-century thought. Fifty years ago,—about 1830,—in the swing of the second French revolution, the belief in progress, both as a fact in the past and a prospect in the future, held undisputed possession of all thinking minds. In 1881, that is no longer the case. It cannot be said that the theory of progress, as the interpretation of history, has entirely disappeared. In the arena of public discussion, the theory of progress still holds a position, but it is not a supreme position; it has a rival or an antagonist in the theory which contemplates our planet, with the life which it carries on its outer crust, as hurrying toward extinction. This new conception, the pessimist conception of human destiny, has by no means reached the same dominion over minds which fifty years ago was held by the optimist conception of progress. Neither of these views is in exclusive occupation of the field of thought. Probably no English thinker of weight would profess himself a disciple of Schopenhauer or von Hartmann. But it is certain that the line of thought, of which von Hartmann's book which bears the title of "*Philosophie des Unbewussten*" is a delineation, is powerfully influencing all English minds which occupy themselves seriously with political or social subjects. If we cannot say that the most accredited utterances of opinion are deeply tinged with pessimistic views, yet, on the other hand, the triumphant tones of 1830 are no longer heard among us.

None but those who, like myself, can remember the exuberant days of the first Reform bill, and of Lord Brougham, when our

youth was buoyant with hope and expectation, when we all felt as persons assisting at the dawn of a new era, when the phrase "march of mind" was the watch-word of all speakers and writers, —no one, I say, who did not share in this exultation of spirit can realize the change of tone that has come over our utterances. Not only do professed prophets of evil, like Mr. Greg or Mr. Ruskin, obtain a hearing, but no accredited public teacher will venture beyond the modified faith that man's power over the course of things extends so far as to enable him to lessen the evil of the world. This view of human life, a view which lies midway between optimism and pessimism, has been called, I believe by G. H. Lewes, *meliorism*. It assumes that misery is, on the whole, the lot of mankind, but that the mass of suffering and discomfort at present existing is capable of being indefinitely reduced by human endeavor. Progress, in this view of the situation, consists in a continual encroachment of human effort upon the domain of evil. We now conceive the "what might be," not as a heaven of positive bliss, but as a little more relief from the inevitable pain of being.

According to this conception, which I believe to be the ordinary mold of thought among us at this moment, the earth is a prison with inexorable laws. These laws are inherent in the construction of the universe, and have come into being long before man existed, and have no regard of his welfare. In this prison, conscious life has somehow grown up; society, as we find ourselves born into it, is a chaos, a chance-medley of struggle to wrest, if may be, a tolerable existence from a cruel destiny. But a gleam of light visits us through the prison bars; science has come, and has shown us, not indeed a way of escape from our captivity, nor a mode of transmuting evil into good, but has shown us how, by understanding the laws of nature, we may avoid being crushed by them. We can neither alter nor suspend one single law of nature, but, within very narrow limits, we may regulate the action of some of those which concern us nearly. It is within this margin that human endeavor can find its proper sphere; and it is to this conflict of science with strength, this attempt to control competition by natural selection, that we now confine the idea of progress. The last half-century has taught us to place very narrow limits upon the axiom that knowledge is power; at the same time, by narrowing the application of the truth, it has increased its efficiency.

Examine this idea of progress, thus limited, a little more closely. Progress in a community is brought about by the endeavor of science to control the operation of the natural law of selection by competition. Put into more simple terms, I call it the conflict of the what might be with what is. Science, of course, is to be taken in its widest sense, as meaning the thorough knowledge of any operation whatever, a practical knowledge through the principle. Thus we can all of us, each in his separate province, lend a hand to progress. It is not men of science only, the professional scientists, who can work for progress; every one does so who invents or adopts a better mode of doing that which has been done less well. The progress of the world is the sum total of all the special improvements effected in the separate provinces of human activity. The term progress denotes an idea immensely wide, but therefore hopelessly vague to minds unaccustomed to these speculations. But reduce it to its elements, dissect it, and you will not only understand it at once, but you will see how you—how every one—may lend a helping hand toward pushing it on.

Every improvement, of whatever kind, originates in a combination of two mental states—a desire and a thought. The desire is the desire of welfare. This is an instinct in all conscious life, an ultimate fact beyond which we cannot go. Here we have brought progress back to a first principle in human nature. The other element which goes to make an improvement is a thought. This thought has two parts: (1) The knowledge of an object or an operation as it is. (2) A conception of the same object or operation as it might be. I am urged—every conscious being is urged—by the instinct of welfare, first to discover and then to adopt a better method, if possible, than the method in use. I may note, in passing, that the welfare sought is not always one's own welfare. It is also often the welfare of others. For example: I do not suppose that the brush is as efficient an instrument for clearing a chimney-flue of soot as was the climbing boy, or even as the goose tied by the leg. As a cleanser, therefore, the chimney-sweep's jointed brush was not an improvement. But, inasmuch as one cruel practice was put an end to, there was a gain to society as a whole, when climbing boys were prohibited by law.

As these three mental states—the desire of welfare, the knowledge of the existing method, and the imagining of

another method not yet existing—must concur in every invention, it follows that a failure or a defect in any of the three faculties will occasion a sterility or improvement or discovery. For example: in warmer climates, where artificial heat is not a prime necessity, and mere basking in the sun can satisfy the desire of welfare, the stimulus to thought is wanting; in such countries there is no progress, or what there is is imported from abroad.

The desire of welfare may be enfeebled by other causes besides climate. Particular creeds or traditional beliefs may negative the impulse of nature toward the what might be. A fatalistic creed, such as those of the Moslem or the Calvinist, tends to paralyze inventive thought and exertion. A creed like that of the monastic orders of the Catholic church, which projects happiness into a far-distant future, may make its devotees indifferent to present welfare. In France, one-third of all the children who are at school at all were in schools taught—I should say kept, for the teaching was little enough—by religious fraternities, holding this creed of renunciation of welfare. Can we be surprised that a republic, alive to the interests of the community, should have held it its first duty to deliver its young from the crippling and benumbing influences of such a training?

It is, perhaps, owing to these combined causes,—climate and creed,—that the shores of the Mediterranean, in the present stage of the world's history, contribute nothing to the progress of mankind.

Again, there can be no invention of a new without a thorough apprehension of the old process. Arkwright could not have invented the water-frame or throstle if he had not been familiar with the mechanics of the spindle, its action in giving the required twist to the cotton thread. It is the man who can most deftly and expeditiously use the received method who is most likely to strike out an easier way of doing the same thing. The French are said to finish their machinery to perfection, but they do not invent new machines—they only copy English or American machines. This is to be ascribed to defective knowledge of what is. Their machinery, as shown at the last exhibition, in 1877, was judged by English experts to show an imperfect grasp of the principle on which any given working proceeds.

Turning now to the third element of invention,—the conception of a new and untried ideal,—this may be often absent where there is great dexterity in the use of the old and received

method. No fact in the natural history of the human species is more familiar than this, that, after a certain age, a man ceases to improve upon his methods. The old are averse to new-fangled inventions; do not even recognize them when brought before them. The way in which new inventions are brought into vogue is through their being adopted by the rising generation. Often, the very skill of the workman stands in the way of invention; he is too well pleased with continuing to do what he is conscious of doing well. The good is here the enemy of the better.

What is true of individuals is true also of nations. When a nation has reached a certain stage of industrial development, it seems to stand still, and a younger people takes up the running. This is not exhaustion of energy, but the conservative force of what is. The methods in use have cost so much to set on foot that they exclude the thought of a better that might be. Mr. Turner, a watch-maker, in his report on the Vienna Exhibition, says "a good English watch could be made as cheaply as a good Swiss one, if our watch-makers, men and masters, would lay aside their prejudices against foreign systems and ideas."

The history of all the useful arts is a commentary upon the phenomenon to which I am now asking your attention,—the phenomenon of "the persistence of the idea." There is hardly a branch of industry in which the introduction of an improved method has not been resisted with all the tenacity of vested interests. The story of the spinning-jenny, or power-loom, which the operatives, the press, and the law courts combined to crush, is known to all. Jute fiber, now an indispensable article, was thirty years in fighting its way against the opposition of the manufacturers. Why do our railroads return to their shareholders barely four per cent.? Chiefly, because the combined opposition of many interests to the introduction of the iron way made its original construction extravagant. The English railways have cost on an average £42,000 a mile, while Belgium has her railways for £18,000 a mile, and the United States theirs (many of these, however, single lines) for £10,000. Sometimes the old idea has embodied itself in costly machinery, which the capitalist cannot afford to break up. The alpaca abounded in South America before 1830; but its wool was too brittle to be spun into a thread by the same machine which had been constructed to spin the shorter and stronger fiber of the sheep. Consequently, the worsted mills of the West Riding of Yorkshire were unable to

utilize the new material. It was by a new invention, which enabled him to twist into thread the alpaca fiber, that Sir Titus made in a few years a magnificent fortune, magnificently used.

Again, in machinery it is not always want of conceptive power which prevents new inventions from being brought forth, but the heavy cost of the experiments necessary for the process of invention. Mr. Lister, walking over a silk warehouse in London, was shown rooms full of what is called "silk waste"—short ends of silk thread. "This accumulation," said the proprietor, "is a great trouble to us. We cannot dispose of it; no one will take it away even for manure, for it will not rot." Mr. Lister's mind was set to work by this suggestion, and the result was the discovery of a method of making velvet out of a material which had before been worthless. But the invention cost the inventor the labor of many years, and the outlay of more than a quarter of a million pounds. It is not every inventor who can command capital on such a scale, even though the ultimate returns were certain, and as splendid as those by which Mr. Lister's ingenuity was rewarded.

Any one who chooses to look into the history of the useful arts, not from the point of view of the artist, but regarding it as a part of the history of civilization, will find it full of illustration of the gradual advance of human power in subduing to its uses natural objects and forces. Beginning the helpless savage described by Lucretius, lying on the bare ground, speechless, weaponless, "*indigus omni vitai auxilio*," he has stepped from invention to invention, till he has surrounded himself with thousands of conveniences, each one of which is the outcome of centuries of continually applied skill and ingenuity. Looked at from this point of view, the amount of acquired or capitalized skill to which each generation succeeds seems a magnificent inheritance, the mere reading over the inventory of which demands a lifetime. The thing that already is is an Aladdin's palace, room after room of costly fabrics and wondrous devices. But there is another side to this picture. Turn around the thing that is, and its reverse presents the thing that might be. The fairy palace is there no longer, and in its place we see a chaos of half-finished plans, imperfect attempts, ambitious failures. If the thoughts and inventions that have come down to us are many, manifold more are those which have perished by the way. The struggle for existence among living beings is not more keen than is the

struggle between thoughts, and survival is as much the result of accident in the one case as in the other. The prodigious waste of nature in carrying on the succession of animal and vegetable life has its parallel in the conduct of the intellectual world. The actualities of our civilization are already vast, but its unfulfilled possibilities are infinite. I have but to utter the fatal phrase, "sanitary arrangements," to remind you how next to nothing has been yet done to remedy the overgrowing pollution of earth, air, and water by our teeming population. Yet how much talk, and thought have been expended in this direction; how many ingenious schemes of sanitation have been propounded! After an enormous outlay on drainage and water-works, the death-rate of Manchester is higher now than it was a century ago. Not everything is known to science, yet how has scientific knowledge outstripped invention in the arts! It requires but an elementary knowledge of numbers to understand the superiority of a decimal system for coinage, weights, and measures, and the French have had such a system for nearly a century. Not even the adherence of Russia and Greece to the old calendar is a more striking instance of stolid persistence in the what is as opposed to the what might be, than our own going on with our penny, the twelfth part of a shilling, with our foot, our yard, and our mile.

The prodigality of Nature in varying her products, though great, is not limitless; but it is far more generous than is civilized man's niggard use of what she places at his disposal. The vegetable fibers on show at the Vienna Exhibition might be numbered by the hundred, but only three of them, flax, jute, and cotton, have come to be adopted in every-day use. In the last half-century scarcely twenty new substances have been added to the raw materials of industry, though scientific discovery has made known to us many hundreds which are so applicable.

I will only adduce one more, and it shall be the last, illustration of the impediments to improvement. This is the difficulty of getting men to combine for those reforms on a great scale which cannot be carried out without concerted action. Where the adoption of a new invention is within the compass of a single person, it can be brought about if he has sufficient perseverance, and sufficient capital, to overcome the passive and active resistance his innovation will provoke. It is otherwise where many men and diverse interests—a parish, a district, or a great city—are concerned.

Illustrations here crowd upon the memory, or, rather, are forced upon the senses, every hour. The most striking are also among the most common. The two or three last summers have made the people of England familiar with a destructive agency which only now and then exerts its force in their climate—I mean, water. The waste of agricultural produce by the overflow of the three rivers of the midland counties, the Trent, the Ouse, and the Thames, cannot be exactly estimated, but it has been very heavy. This is a disaster which recurs whenever a wet summer occurs—a disaster which is certain to recur whenever the rain-fall exceeds a given number of inches in a given number of hours. You will ask, are no precautions taken by the persons likely to suffer, against a calamity the incidence of which, though irregular in period, is certain in time? The answer is, none whatever. There are destroying agents—*e. g.*, the earthquake or the volcano—which are beyond human control; but the flooding of the midland counties by their water-courses is absolutely preventable. A river is nothing more than a channel, or gutter, for carrying down to the sea the collected surface-drainage of a district. The depth and width of such a channel must be proportioned to the maximum volume of water requiring to be carried off. Where the fall is sufficient, this can be done by the simple process of deepening the channel below the surface-level of the ground. Where there is not fall enough, as, for instance, in the Trent, which has a fall of barely one foot per mile, it is necessary to raise dikes or embankments, above the surface, and thus create an artificial aqueduct. The Trent, the Ouse, and the Thames run now exactly as they did in the days of the ancient Britons. We see these floods periodically destroying thousands of acres of meadow, and sweeping away thousands of tons of hay. The capital thus lost in a couple of wet summers would suffice to raise dikes which would prevent such a disaster forever. The riparian owners prefer to wring their hands over their loss, or to invite subscriptions to make it good, rather than combine to prevent its recurrence. There is no central administration in the country strong enough to enforce a measure of the greatest public utility if the most insignificant right of private property stands in the way.

MARK PATTISON.